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The Big Walleye

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Abstract

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The men talked on — my Dad, then Alec, then the outsider Snipps, telling stories of fishing or hunting, tales of veterans who were happy, contented, and wise with age.

Their voices were barely audible now; my mind drifted over their triumphs and tragedies. I was yet an outsider — to practice, to listen, to learn was my ambition.

They were comparing catches now, kidding each other about fool mistakes and oversights, a friendly discussion that hit home hard. This was a subject I was an expert on. The story came back clear and fresh and biting as the amber-colored liquor in the bottle on the mantel. Dad was retelling it but I would remember better than he . . .

Dad's birthday present was the incentive to fish walleyes that day. Actually we never needed an incentive to fish. We had given him a rod, reel, and line the week before — my mother the rod, myself the reel, and my little brother Joe the line. How I prided myself on my contribution — nineteen hard-earned, and harder-to-save dollars I paid for the reel, a Shakespeare and a honey. When he shook my hand and said, "Thanks, son," I swelled with pride. I knew that I would have spent a hundred dollars if necessary.

We decided right then to try the walleyes the next day, but only over mother's protests. It had been unusually cold for middle-October weather, and the lake had been rough the past week from a stiff north wind.

Five o'clock had come, dark and bitterly cold, the next morning. We swallowed breakfast hurriedly and were on our way. Alec's cottage was in its first stages then, a one-

room affair with lean-to garage. The garage was bigger than the rest of the cottage. It contained the two boats, motors and fishing gear.

Alec was in bed when we got there. We could see him through the single front window, huddled under four or five blankets, breathing a heavy frosted breath into the cold room. Dad wrote him a note telling where we were going while I piled our gear into the boat. Then he came down the dock steps with three heavy coats and the motor. I can still hear him ask, "Got everything, Bill?"

"Sure, Dad, checked again to make sure."

"Alec will be out later. Said he'd show us up in half the time we needed. I told him 'Like hell you will.' " We both laughed at that because we knew, like everyone else, that he was the best fisherman, and hunter, too, in the country.

The motor protested for a long time but finally sputtered and then settled into a normal drone; we edged away from the dock and out onto the bleak, slapping lake. Icy cold water sprayed over the bow and against our repellent clothes. My fingers numbed quickly and I buried my hands in the depths of the deck jacket.

Dad cut the motor near mid lake and we drifted, letting the waves carry us. Baiting the hook with cold, slippery minnows would have frustrated a magician, but Dad's experienced steady fingers handled his work and mine expertly. We let out our lines and took the safety off the reels, allowing the undercurrent to pull out the slack. Then followed the long wait for a strike — a sudden jerk, a pull, a tug. The rod bent double, straining against a hidden pressure. A snag this time, but it could have been a big walleye. Then the hated task of starting the motor, bringing in all but the snagged line, retrieving it and finally breaking it in anger. All this time the wind and cold swept the lake and stung the face and hands. Again we drifted. No strikes! Once again the trip to the center of the lake. Still no luck. "Maybe I'll have to eat my words, huh," Dad said. I nodded. I was getting cold and my teeth chattered. "How 'bout a hot cup of coffee and then we'll try 'er again?"

The sportsman's blood must have answered for me because my mind disagreed when I replied, "Let's take another trip out and then go in for coffee."

Dad agreed, "Okay, I'll start 'er up."

Out we went, and the long trip back started, the lines playing out, the steady resistance of the water pulling on them. There was no longer any thought of getting a strike, only the thought of hot coffee and the warm stove when —

"I've either got a bad snag or a turtle, Bill. It's a funny kind of a bite. Still there, though." This is all we need, I thought. A big, lumbering turtle that would take an hour to land. Might as well cut the line now and get it over with.

WHE-E-E-E — His reel sang and the look on his face scared me. He'd hooked something really big. His arms jerked away from his body, his hands grabbed the rod handle and the handles of the reel spun wildly as the fish rushed, and then slowed. This was no turtle.

"Row with him, Bill, or he'll pull all my line." I grabbed for the oars and forgot the cold. An excited fear gripped my muscles. Had to be a big pike or pickerel. Maybe even a catfish. Nothing else in this lake was that powerful.

The line raced first to the right, then to the left, stopping crazily and then racing away again. Dad fought hard, straining every muscle to keep a tight line, and at the same time gain ground. The fish didn't give an inch. For a second the line hung slack in the water.

"Lost him! I'll be damned." Dad slumped dejectedly.

I eased up on the oars, glanced at the slack line and hollered, "No, you haven't. He's still hooked. He's coming this way." The slack line, out about fifty feet, was disappearing in the rough waves as the fish swam like lightning directly toward the boat.

"Watch your slack! ! He'll break the line!" I grabbed for the motor and tipped it into the boat just as the remainder of the line curled underneath and bent the rod double.

"Turn 'er, Bill, quick!" I hauled hard on the right oar and we came about. The fish was going in the other direction, picking up speed like a racing car coming into the stretch. Sweat stood in beads on Dad's forehead and I was soaking wet. Dad played his slack and brought him up short. This time he came out of the water about seventy-five feet away, shook his head wildly, trying to throw the hook, and then disappeared in the foam of an on-rushing wave. We had him licked! The rest of the landing should be easy.

Always wary, Dad reeled him in close and shouted, "Get the net!" And there I sat. No net. I searched every square inch of the boat but no net.

He saw the predicament and handed me the rod. "Take the line and hold him tight. I'll reach in and lift him up. Be careful of the minnow bucket on the seat."

The boat rocked unsteadily in the waves and the rod required both my hands; I forgot the bucket.

We were riding the boat now like men on a rolling log. I braced myself and on Dad's signal brought the fish to the surface. When he saw daylight and the boat, all hell broke loose. He thrashed and lunged, twisting and turning, stirring the green water into a foamy mass near the boat. Dad shifted his weight to grab the slippery, shiny scales of the big wall-eye and I lost my balance, knocking the minnow bucket off the seat. Dad turned to make a desperate grab for me as I disappeared backward over the side, capsizing the boat. I swallowed ice-cold water, choked, and swallowed some more before Dad grabbed me by the coat and hauled me up.

Alec was right there to bring us in. He had seen the battle from a distance but couldn't get to us in time to give any help. Without saying a word we raced for the shore and the warm stove in his cottage. I sobbed quietly. I had lost not only the fish but the reel, line, and most of the new rod. I held the handle of it in my hand. It had broken when the boat capsized. The icy wind nearly froze us as we raced to the dock. Hurrying to the cottage, we stripped, huddled under heavy wool blankets, and warmed by the fire — a fire that threw heat to all four corners of the room from a pot-bellied stove. I was so ashamed I was afraid to look at Dad. Alec had gone outside and had come back into the room with . . .

"Bill! Bill! Time to go to bed if we're gonna get up at six." Yawning and stretching, I shuddered at the thought of climbing in between cold sheets. I stretched again and thought of the end of the story.

"I was just telling Snipps here, about the time we lost the big walleye and fell in the lake on a day like this. And

the look in your eyes when Alec brought in our landing net from the car."

Alec laughed when I blushed and patted my arm reassuringly. "Don't worry about old Bill. He's come a long way since then. He's as good a fisherman as his Dad or me now, and he damn near shot as many birds as I did last fall."

It was good to be accepted by the veterans — warm and exciting, so warm in fact that I hardly noticed the cold sheets as I climbed in bed a while later, thinking about the time Alec hit two ducks that had skyrocketed out of gun range as they flew the shoot at the south end of the lake.

— William Postma, *Sci. Sr.*



Loneliness

Here in our little clearing of reality,
Surrounded by a forest of confusion,
We huddle close to the campfire of companionship,
And tell ourselves in the dimming light,
That with our pile of firewood beside us
(Cords cut and selected to burn long and bright),
We fear little of the cat-like restlessness,
In the timbered shadows of the night.

And as we sacrifice the last to the fire
And the ash pile only glows,
A shadow slinks in with the cold and darkness,
Growing bolder as we doze
Till it pounces and devours us;
And we are alone.

— James Wickliff, *Sci. Jr.*

"Loneliness" won honorable mention in the recent Iowa Poetry Association contest. Another poem by Mr. Wickliff, "Portrait of an Old Man," won first place in the contest and has previously appeared in *Sketch*.